

Kadir: Dr M had ordered NST to 'erase memory of Anwar'

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Then-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad instructed New Straits Times to "do away with" his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim following his sacking in 1998, said the daily's former group editor-in-chief A Kadir Jasin.

"His (Mahathir's) feeling was that we should try to do away with Anwar. Maybe we should try to erase the memory of Anwar," Kadir said.

NONE Kadir (left) said he had responded that this was nearly impossible because the daily had developed Anwar, for the past 16 years, as Mahathir's successor on the PM's instructions.

It would be impossible to change tack overnight, so Kadir said he proposed to simply ignore Anwar as a public figure.

"Of course, this could not be accepted because in Umno, they believe that you have to use all your might and your power to destroy Anwar. I think it did not quite work out," he said.

He was speaking at a seminar at Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) Malaysia today on the role of the media in elections.

Kadir, who served as New Straits Times group editor and New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief between 1988 and 2000, said this when illustrating his point that Media Prima, which now owns the New Straits Times group, is answerable only to the Umno president.

Therefore, he said, people should not expect the mainstream media to change following the 13th general election, since this would require the Umno president's consent.

NONE "If you are answerable to the party in general, then you are answerable to a lot more people.

"Maybe some people in the Umno supreme council may want changes, but in the case of the Media Prima Group, it is answerable only to the (Umno president)," he said.

However in view of Umno's improved electoral performance, he said, this was unlikely.

"Just after May 5 (polling day), the attitude among the practitioners of the mainstream media was this: Why should we change? We did not lose.

"As far as Umno is concerned, it had done better. So why should we change? If we did not do badly this time, we could be doing better next time... so there is no reason to change," Kadir said.

Citing examples of regime changes in South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia, he said the only way the mainstream media would change is in the event of a change in government, because the media would be forced to follow suit.

Pointing to The Star, Kadir said the daily has already toned down its pro-BN stance because its owner, MCA, had performed badly.

In the last general election, Umno increased its holdings in parliament from 79 seats to 88 seats, while MCA declined from 15 seats to seven.

'Hard to remain balanced'

Another speaker, Sin Chew Daily deputy editor-in-chief Tay Tian Yan, said it was increasingly difficult for newspapers in the mainstream media to remain balanced.

NONETay (left) said, "I think that we are quite balanced and fair. However, to be fair and balanced in the Malaysian media context is not an easy task, in fact it is quite difficult."

He said the media was constantly being attacked from both sides of the political divide.

"On the other side, Pakatan Rakyat supporters think that to be balanced is not enough, the media has to agree with their aspirations and stand on their side."

Tay said an internal study had found that Sin Chew had been balanced in covering both BN and Pakatan Rakyat, which concurred with the findings that a Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia researcher presented at this seminar yesterday.

However, as if proving his point that no one is satisfied, Kadir later said, "Sin Chew Daily has always been seen, from my point of view, even then (as group editor-in-chief of NST), as anti-establishment."

Meanwhile, another speaker, Malaysiakini editor-in-chief Steven Gan, when answering a question about the falling revenue of the print media, questioned how long Sin Chew's increasing circulation would last as a result of its political stance.

"It will be untenable. When you have 80 percent of the Chinese voting for the opposition, will they continue to read Sin Chew?"

'No longer setting the agenda'

Asked whether the mainstream media would continue to be relevant in setting the news agenda, Kadir said that the answer was both "yes and no".

"Yes, the mainstream media is still important. A lot of people still read, listen and watch, just not necessarily believing them.

NONE" And no, because assuming all the mainstream media is biased towards the government - in fact during the election period they had to be nothing more than the mouthpiece of the ruling party - then the outcome of the May 5 election would suggest that more than half of the voters did not listen to the mainstream media.

"However, despite not getting the majority votes, the mainstream media still has lots of influence among the rural votes, among the Malays," Kadir said.

Gan (right) agreed that despite the growth of online media the mainstream media still had a powerful role in setting the agenda.

He said, "The mainstream media is still very much a formidable force. You cannot to rule them out in the near future."

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